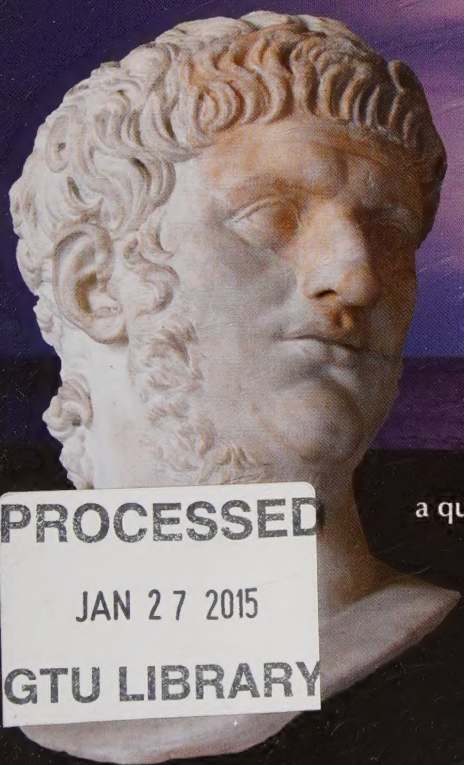


Light

...on a new world



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a quarterly magazine focusing on the
Bible and its message for today

Women of faith ●

The kingdom of God ●

Paul appeals to Caesar ●

VOLUME 25.4

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Visit www.lightmagazine.org for back issues, special issues and further information.

Light on a new world

Volume 25.4

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Cover Picture:

Lightning provided Jesus with a graphic illustration of what his return would be like – see page 33.

Inset: Bust of the Emperor Nero – see page 9.

Note:

All Bible quotations are taken from the New King James Version (NKJV) except where another version is indicated after the text.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

Part 14: Paul appeals to Caesar

The Apostle Paul was never a man to shrink from preaching the true gospel. Having travelled to Jerusalem to settle a doctrinal issue over whether or not Gentile Christians should obey Jewish laws, he and others went into the temple as recorded in Acts chapter 21. Paul would have been a well-known figure in Jerusalem where, in his earlier life, he had been one of the main persecutors of those who followed Jesus. Having 'changed sides' as it were, he no doubt had many enemies in the city.

He would have been easily recognised but this did not deter him from being there.

The uproar in Jerusalem

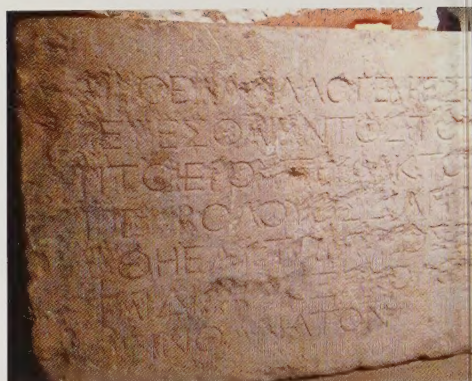
His presence in the temple was soon noted by Jews who had travelled from Asia where they had seen Paul at work. These men stirred up the crowd in the temple saying: *'Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place'* (Acts 21.28).

In the eyes of the Jews, Paul was defiling the temple. They thought he had brought Trophimus into the temple with him, a Greek disciple from Ephesus who had helped Paul with his work. If this were the case it

would have been a particular insult to the Jews since Gentiles were not allowed beyond the outer court. A Gentile going further into the temple could face the death penalty. Such was the feeling of the crowd that *'all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut'* (Acts 21.30). Paul faced a mob and such was their feeling that they wanted to kill him and would have done so but for protection from the Roman soldiers in the city:

'Now as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. He immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them. And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the commander came near and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and he asked who he was and what he had done. And some among the multitude cried one thing and some another. And when he could not ascertain the truth because of the tumult, he commanded him to be taken into the barracks.'

Acts 21.31-34



The outer court of Herod's temple, the Court of the Gentiles, was separated by a low barricade from the inner courts. At intervals along the barrier were notices threatening any non-Jew with death if they crossed this line. This one of those notices which survived the destruction of the temple. now in the Archaeological Museum, Istanbul.

Paul's arrest by the Romans

It is easy to read these words without thinking about the emotions that Paul must have gone through. He had been warned that by going to Jerusalem he would face arrest but replied that he was both happy to be taken prisoner or indeed to die *'for the name of the Lord Jesus'* (Acts 21.10-14). Now he was facing a severe trial including intense physical suffering and possibly death at the hands of his persecutors.

What a strong expression of Paul's faith this was and what an example to other followers of Jesus Christ to

be determined in their own faith. How that faith was being tested as the mob beat him up and only stopped on sight of the soldiers! Paul must have thought death was imminent but we read nothing in the account to show that he was fearful. Rather we find that, despite the beating, he was soon ready to make use of the events as an opportunity to preach to both the soldiers and to the people who had tried to kill him. Paul asked the commander of the soldiers for permission to speak to the people (Acts 21.39).

Today we cannot imagine such a request being granted but Jerusalem was a politically sensitive city where Jews and Romans co-existed in a state of uneasy tension. The Roman rulers had to try and maintain peace and deal fairly with all sides. Having told the commander that he was a Jew, Paul was allowed to speak.

His words in Acts chapter 22 set out the history of how his life had dramatically changed and how he came to be in the city in a very different role from his previous life as a persecutor of Christians.

Paul was an intelligent man having been brought up in Tarsus and then taught in Jerusalem by Gamaliel, a prominent Jewish rabbi, a highly respected Pharisee and teacher of

the Law of Moses. Paul not only knew his rights under Roman law but he could understand the religious background and beliefs of those Jews who sought to kill him.

Paul's speech to the Jews in Jerusalem

Paul reminded the assembled crowd how he had persecuted Christians and delivered many men and women to prison. He had been encouraged by the Jewish council to go to Damascus to arrest Christians there and deliver them for punishment. He then recounted the story of his own conversion - an event covered in an earlier article in this series (See Volume 23.2). You may like to pause now to read Acts chapter 22 verses 1-21 where this is recorded.

The events on the road to Damascus had a dramatic effect on Paul. He realised just how wrong he had been in his previous actions and adherence to the ways of the Jews who had rejected Jesus. He now knew that Jesus was the Messiah that had been promised to the Jewish Patriarchs and foretold by the prophets of Israel in their Old Testament Scriptures. He recounted how he had met a Jewish disciple Ananias in Damascus who told him about the special mission that Paul would carry out:

'...The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know his will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of his mouth. For you will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.' Acts 22.14,15

Paul was indeed a chosen servant of God and now he was a witness to all men and took all opportunities to spread the gospel message. Instead of imprisoning and beating others he was the one who was beaten and imprisoned, but his faith shone through in his words and actions. Paul told the Jews that the closing words of Jesus to him on the road to Damascus were: *'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles'* (Acts 22.21). These words were highly provocative to his Jewish audience for they did not accept either the words of Jesus or that the Gentiles could be related to God's plan of salvation.

The religious leaders of the Jews were happy to accept Gentiles as Jewish proselytes if they were circumcised and obeyed the Law of Moses. However, Paul was saying that Gentiles could have equal standing with Jews before God through faith in Jesus Christ. This was totally unacceptable to the Jewish mind and offended them. Hence their reaction: *'Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!'* (Acts 22.22).

These Jews were blind to the true message of the gospel. As Paul later wrote to the believers in Corinth concerning the Jews:

'...their minds were hardened. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament... a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.'

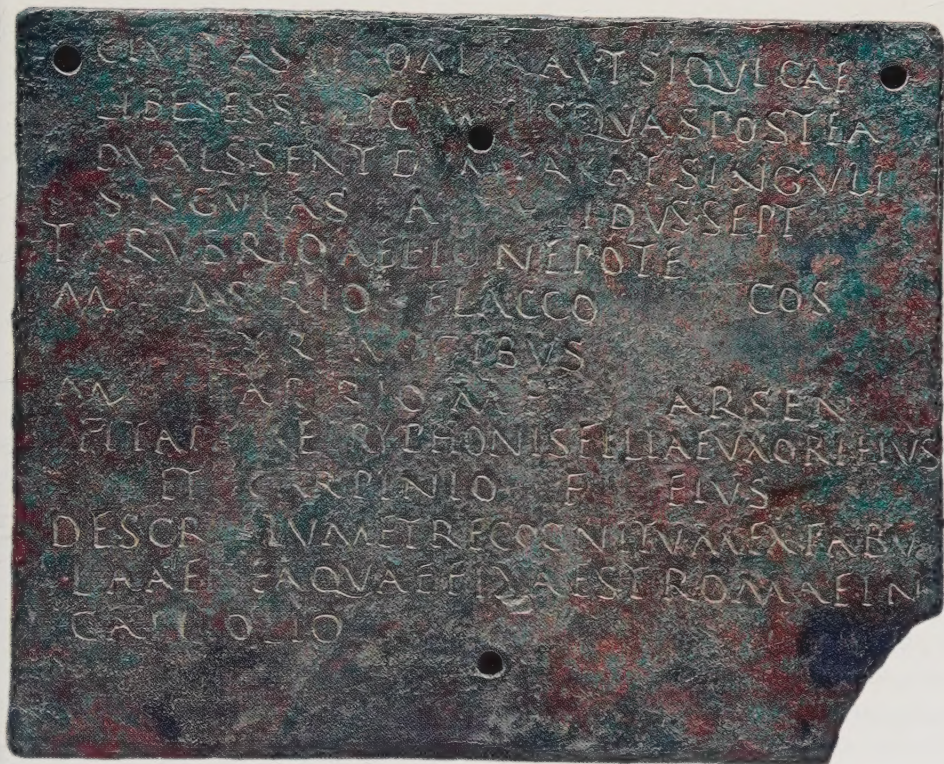
2 Corinthians 3.14-16

Paul's mission was to persuade both Jews and Gentiles to turn to the Lord so that they might accept Jesus as their Saviour and obtain the promise of salvation from death which is only possible through him.

Paul - a Roman citizen

The reaction of the Jews made the commander believe that Paul was stirring up further trouble and ordered that he be taken for scourging to find out why there was such a problem. Paul was secured ready for this beating which could lead to long term disability or even death because it was so cruel. A scourge was a whip in which pieces of bone or metal had been inserted to make the punishment more painful, but Paul was to surprise the centurion guarding him with his next words:

'And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood



by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncon-
demned?"

Acts 22:25

Paul was a Roman citizen – possibly an honour awarded either to his father or another predecessor for particular services to the Roman Empire. Thus Paul was born both a Roman and a Jew. Had the Roman commander proceeded with the scourging he would himself have faced severe disciplinary action together with his men.

A bronze diploma granting Roman citizenship, now in the British Museum. Citizenship was often awarded to public officials or soldiers etc in recognition of long service. It conferred certain privileges such as a reduction in taxes and exemption from some forms of punishment. These could be passed on to the next generation, hence probably Paul's reference to being 'born free'.



It is possible that Paul carried with him a small portable version like this one.

Paul's defence before the Jewish Council

This led the commander to wonder why the Jews were in such commotion because of Paul's words. So he summoned the chief priests and their Council and set Paul before them. This gave Paul another opportunity to preach the gospel. He realised that the group assembled contained both Pharisees and Sadducees – different Jewish groups with differing beliefs. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection but the Sadducees did not. Paul said to them: *'Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!'* (Acts 23.6).

The result was a dispute between the Pharisees and the Sadducees which the book of Acts describes:

'And when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks.' Acts 23.10

This shows us Paul's determination that the Word of God should be spoken whenever possible regardless of his own personal safety and we read of the Divine commend-

ation that he received, combined with guidance as to how he should move forward: *'...the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome"'* (Acts 23.11). These words of Jesus must have been of great encouragement to Paul at this difficult time. He had preached the resurrection of the dead and later he reminded the Christians at Corinth of its fundamental importance:

'Now if Christ is preached that he has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is vain and your faith is also vain.'

1 Corinthians 15.12-14

Paul went on to answer the challenge of doubters with a positive statement that *'Christ has risen from the dead, and has become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep'* (1 Corinthians 15.20). We urge our readers to study carefully Paul's arguments in this chapter, which is a treatise on the hope of resurrection from the dead, a foundation stone of the true gospel message.

A plot to kill Paul thwarted

Meanwhile the Jews were still plotting to kill him: *'...when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul'* (Acts 23.12). They plotted to request of the Roman commander that Paul be brought to them for further questioning and planned to ambush him on the way. However, details of the ambush became known to Paul and then to the commander. Instead the commander decided to send him to Felix, the Roman governor at Caesarea.

Paul's defence before Felix

Felix called the high priest and various elders to him from Jerusalem so that he could question both them and Paul about events. He was accused by them of causing dissension among Jews *'throughout the world'* and also of trying to profane the temple (Acts 24.5,6). They suggested that Felix should question him. This is just what Paul wanted because it again gave him an opportunity to preach the gospel and he said:

'But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are

written in the Law and in the Prophets. I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offence towards God and men.' Acts 24. 14-16

It seems that the Christians were described as *'the Way'* at this time. Felix was aware of them and had what is described as *'more accurate knowledge of the Way'* (Acts 24.22). His knowledge and perhaps sympathy for Paul's beliefs and zealotness, made it difficult for him to take a decision about Paul's future. He decides to wait until the commander arrived, so Paul was kept under the supervision of a centurion but was able to receive visitors and have some liberty.

A few days later Felix and his wife Drusilla, had a private meeting with Paul to learn more about his beliefs and faith in Christ. Drusilla was a great grand-daughter of Herod the Great. He was the infamous king who had commanded that babies under two years old should be killed when he heard from the wise men that Jesus had been born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2.16). Acts records that as Paul *'reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, "Go away for now;*

when I have a convenient time I will call for you” (Acts 24.25).

Felix was being made aware of his own sins whilst recognising the conviction of Paul’s words and hence he had concerns about his own future in the eyes of God. He wanted to release Paul but also hoped that Paul would bribe him to do so: *‘he also hoped that money would be given him by Paul, that he might release him. Therefore he sent for him more often and conversed with him’ (Acts 24.26).* It seems likely that Felix was much moved by the gospel but did not have sufficient conviction to act. He kept Paul in custody for two years until he was succeeded in office by Festus.

Paul before Festus

The Jews again plotted to ambush Paul by asking Festus to send him back to Jerusalem, but Festus probably suspected their cunning plan and said that Paul should remain at Caesarea adding: *‘let those who have authority among you go down with me and accuse this man, to see if there is any fault in him’ (Acts 25.5).*

When they had all assembled at Caesarea, Paul was questioned again. The Jews made complaints against him but could not prove them. Paul responded: *‘Neither*

against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all’ (Acts 25.8). Festus seemed unconvinced and, perhaps hoping to be rid of the problem, asked Paul *‘Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?’ (Acts 25.9).*

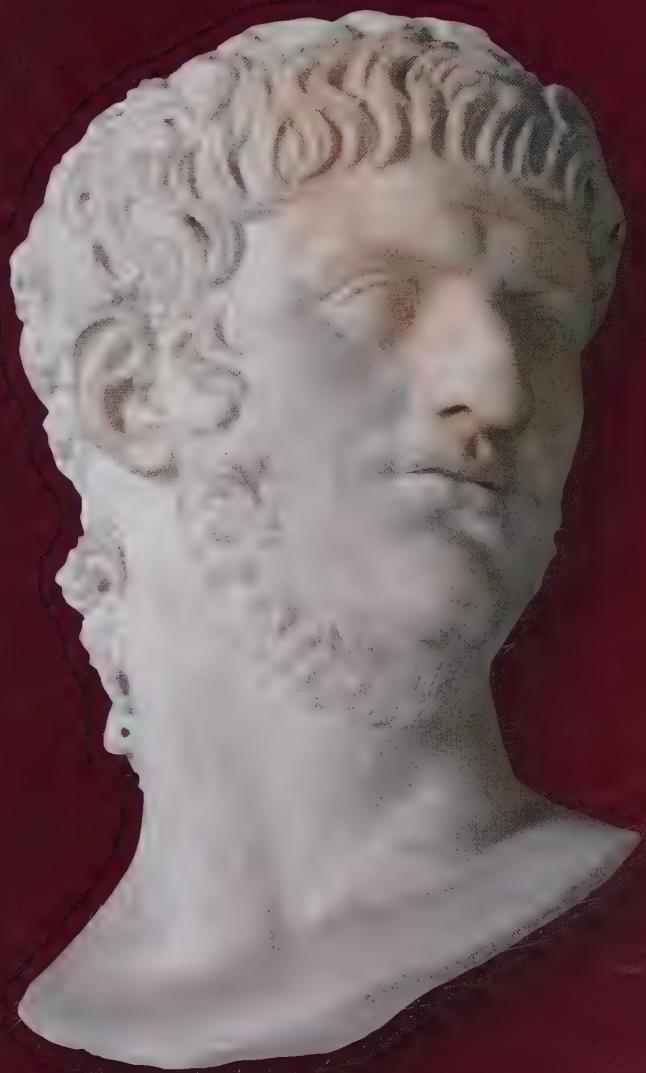
An appeal to Caesar

This request gave Paul the opportunity to fulfil the mission foretold in the dream about bearing witness to Jesus in Rome. So he responded:

‘I stand at Caesar’s judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. For if I am an offender, or have committed anything worthy of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar.’
Acts 25.10,11

Paul was exercising his right, as a Roman citizen, to appeal directly to Caesar in Rome if he felt that a local court was not handling his case properly. He knew exactly what he was doing. He knew that by making this appeal he would be able to carry out the commission that God

Marble bust of Nero at
the Capitoline Museum,
Rome



EMPEROR NERO CAESAR AD 54 – 68

The infamous Caesar to whom Paul made his appeal. The first five years of his reign were relatively peaceful, but after that his actions became increasingly cruel and irrational. The historian Tacitus describes how Nero tortured and executed Christians after the great fire of Rome in AD 64. Both Paul and Peter may have met their deaths under his rule.

had given him and that it would give him further opportunity to proclaim the gospel and to bring its message to others. Festus replied: *'You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!'* (Acts 25.12).

Relevance for today

Paul's actions in appealing to Caesar provide us with two lessons. He exercised his privilege as a Roman citizen, firstly to avoid a cruel flogging and then to have a fair trial by being heard by the highest authority – the court of the Emperor Nero in Rome. There was no personal benefit in this for as we read earlier, he was prepared *'to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus'* (Acts 21.13). It enabled him to continue with the mission that God had ordained that he should carry out.

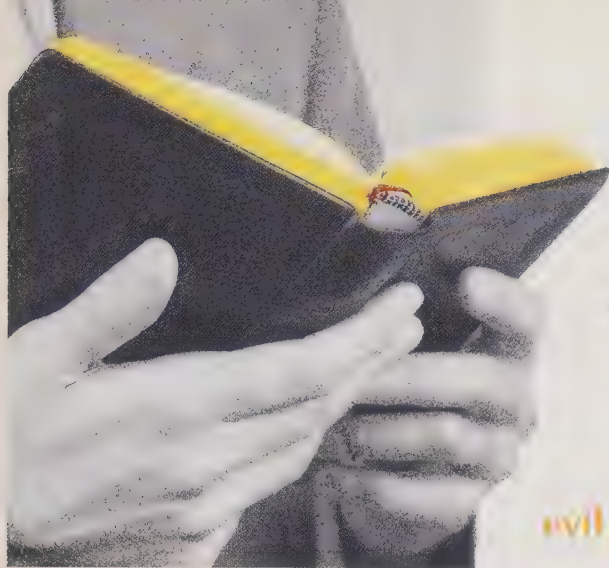
We hear a lot these days about exercising our rights as citizens, but so often this results in violent protests, strikes and the use of force to obtain something. The first lesson we can learn is that Jesus taught his disciples to follow the path of non-resistance to evil and the true Christian cannot be involved in such activities to obtain a personal advantage but must leave these things in God's hands.

Secondly we see God's over-riding control of the situation to bring

about His purpose with Paul as previously announced to Ananias *'...he is a chosen vessel of mine to bear my name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel'* (Acts 9.15). Through the work of Paul and others the gospel was preached throughout the Roman world, giving the Gentiles the opportunity to obey its call, be baptized into the saving name of Jesus and prepare for the day of his return to establish the kingdom of God on earth.

Is this your hope for the future?

John Hitches
Norfolk, UK



BIBLE TEACHING ABOUT:

evil spirits and demons

Demon possession is one of the features of New Testament events that is particularly focused on by some churches. Several of the healing miracles in the New Testament refer to evil spirits being driven out or commanded to leave a person. An example is in the Gospel of Matthew where we read:

‘When evening had come, they brought to him (Jesus) many who were demon-possessed. And he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick.’

Matthew 8.1

Can we take these accounts literally, as we do the other healing miracles, or is there something else going on?

The Old Testament

It would stand to reason that if people were being tormented by spirits throughout history, there would be mention of it in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament – so what do we find?

- ❖ The word ‘sick’ appears 38 times in the Old Testament. Not once is it associated with spirits or demons.
- ❖ The word ‘sickness’ appears 15 times. Again, no spirits are mentioned.
- ❖ The word ‘ill’ is used in a different sense in the KJV e.g. ‘ill favoured’, meaning generally ‘bad’, so we do not need to consider those references.

We conclude that there is no Bible evidence that anyone attributed illness and disease to demons or evil spirits, prior to New Testament times. So this is a uniquely New Testament phenomenon and must have been introduced from elsewhere.

The Greeks

One of the main problems in New Testament Judea, was the 'Hellenisation' of the ancient world, meaning that since the time of Alexander the Great, who conquered the region around 334 BC, Greek influence had been making inroads. Many Jews spoke Greek, dressed like Greeks and even thought like Greeks. False beliefs such as the immortal soul and the afterlife came from Greek culture. For example 'Hades' was a Greek God who became synonymous with the 'underworld' or place of the dead.

Whilst it might seem logical to blame Greek influence for the belief that evil spirits caused mental illnesses, their understanding of illness was more rational than that. Their knowledge of medicine which was adopted by other cultures was known as humorism. It is described by one writer as follows:

'Essentially, this theory holds that the human body is filled with four

basic substances, called humors, which are in balance when a person is healthy. All diseases and disabilities supposedly resulted from an excess or deficit of one of these four humors. These deficits were thought to be caused by vapors inhaled or absorbed by the body. The four humors are black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood. Greeks and Romans, and the later Muslim and Western European medical establishments that adopted and adapted classical medical philosophy, believed that each of these humors would wax and wane in the body, depending on diet and activity. When a patient was suffering from a surplus or imbalance of one of these four fluids, then said patients' personality and or physical health could be negatively affected. This theory was closely related to the theory of the four elements: earth, fire, water and air; earth predominantly present in the black bile, fire in the yellow bile, water in the phlegm, and all four elements present in the blood' (Tyge Brahe by Alex Wittendorff 1994).

Whilst we would not agree with these theories now, the understanding that many illnesses are caused by imbalances or deficiencies in the body, shows it to be rational and scientific, which cannot be said of evil spirits. So we need to



The famous Greek physician Hippocrates (460–370 BC), sometimes known as the father of modern medicine. The Hippocratic oath is still used throughout the world today

look elsewhere for the origin of these ideas.

Babylon

For some time prior to Alexander's conquest of the known world, the Jewish people had been under the influence of first the Babylonians and then the Medes and Persians. Indeed, the Jews had been held in captivity in the Babylonian heartland for decades.

In Babylonian culture, the belief in spirits was commonplace. According to one writer, these so-called

demons lurked in remote or hidden places like graves, mountain tops and in the shadows of ruins. They would go out at night, enter homes through holes and crevices and torture their victims. They were responsible for anything bad that happened, ranging from destructive winds, pestilent fevers and disease to headaches, petty quarrels, hatred and jealousy. (Religion of Babylonia and Assyria by Morris Jastrow 1893; free download available at Project Gutenberg - see page 84 for reference to disease-bringing spirits, for example).

So I think we have found the source of this practice of blaming evil spirits for illnesses, but how was this applied in the New Testament?

The Miracles of Jesus

There are 28 recorded healing miracles in the New Testament. Of these, the majority would have had clear physical signs, such as blindness, crippling and leprosy for example, and no spirits are mentioned.

In eight of the 28 cases, spirits are mentioned but no symptoms, other than where 'a woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bent over and could in no way raise herself up' (Luke 13:11). Although this could possibly be due to curvature of the spine, there was

presumably no outward sign as to why the woman was bent double, so a spirit was blamed as the cause. We can therefore draw the conclusion that if there was no outward sign of the illness, spirits were blamed. Some of the afflictions ascribed to spirits are conditions known to modern medicine. Here are two examples:

Luke the physician records the sufferings of a child in these words: *'And behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out; it convulses him so that he foams at the mouth, and bruising him, it departs from him with great difficulty'* (Luke 9.39). This is almost certainly what today we call epilepsy. A similar illness is described by Luke as *'a man who had a spirit of an unclean demon'* which threw him to the ground and Jesus healed him (Luke 4.33-35).

In Mark's gospel record we are introduced to a man who said to Jesus *'My name is Legion; for we are many'* (Mark 5.9). Today, we are familiar with multiple personality disorders, sometimes referred to as schizophrenia. One of the details that could be overlooked in this account is the impact on those who saw the man healed:

'Then they came to Jesus, and saw the one who had been demon-possessed and had the legion, sitting

and clothed and in his right mind.

And they were afraid.' Mark 5.15

If the man who had been healed was now *'in his right mind'*, it stands to reason that before being healed, he was not in his right mind, which is how we might term mental illness.

Common terminology

It seems clear that where there are physical symptoms or signs, evil spirits or demons are not blamed. Three of the healing miracles are where Jesus raised people from the dead. There is no suggestion that evil spirits made them dead.

In all cases, the terminology used is of Jesus *'healing'*. Therefore even in this superstitious time, these afflictions were still viewed as illnesses that were healed. Jesus sometimes *'rebuked a spirit'* (see Luke 9.37-43, Mark 1.21-27) but he also rebuked a fever (see Luke 4.38,39).

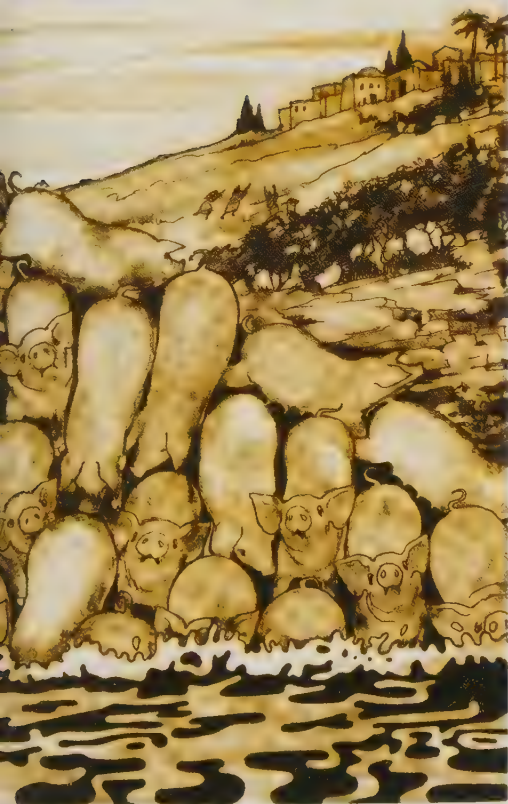
Interestingly the passage we started with from the Gospel of Matthew shows the work of Jesus to be in fulfilment of an Old Testament prophecy:

'When evening had come, they brought to him many who were demon-possessed. And he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah

the prophet, saying: "He himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses."" Matthew 8.16,17

So as this prophecy was fulfilled by the work of Jesus, we can conclude that 'spirits' must equate with 'infirmities' and 'sicknesses'.

In the healing of 'Legion', Jesus transferred his illness to a herd of pigs who bolted down a steep slope into the Sea of Galilee and were drowned.



Why did Jesus use this terminology?

This is an interesting question. Firstly, the answer might be that even though this was the terminology used at the time, not everyone took it literally, hence it was still regarded as 'healing' and putting someone 'in their right mind'. Secondly, Jesus' main concern was to heal those who were afflicted. To schizophrenics, delusional beliefs and psychotic experiences are symptoms of their illness, so belief in their demons and the idea that the demons could be sent into a herd of pigs, would be very real to them.

Sometimes, in order to get past this obstacle, it is necessary to go along with their delusions. This technique is often used with cases of severe dementia, where disagreeing with sufferers can make them very angry.

Jesus' time was short; only three and a half years to spread the gospel or good news of the coming kingdom of God. With the miraculous powers Jesus possessed, a healing might be achieved in minutes, but overcoming the superstitions and false teachings of the age would take longer, relying as it did (and as it does now) on a person's desire to change.

It is also worth noting that in the years that followed the ascension of Jesus to heaven, the New Testament records just two instances of illnesses being attributed to unclean spirits:

‘Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.’ Acts 5.16

‘For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralysed and lame were healed.’

Acts 8.7

The miracles performed here by the Apostles are classified as being ‘healed’ and in Acts 8.7 the same distinction between visible and invisible ailments is maintained. Perhaps, although there is no record of Jesus directly correcting the superstitions of the times, the lack of any examples beyond the record in the book of Acts, might suggest that these superstitions were being gradually overcome!

The miracles performed by Jesus demonstrated an aspect of the coming kingdom of God. He did not heal every invalid in Judea, nor feed every hungry person, nor raise every dead person, but in his short time on earth, Jesus gave a picture

of what the Kingdom would be like, echoing the amazing prophetic words of Isaiah which give us a glimpse into the future. This is the future that awaits those who believe the Gospel and become related through baptism to the Bible hope of salvation from death (see Isaiah chapters 35.1-10; 61.1-3; 65.17-25).

In the last book of the Bible we are projected to a time in the future which echoes the prophet Isaiah’s words, when suffering, the need for healing and even death itself will be a thing of the past.

‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.’

Revelation 21.4

Andrew Longman
Milton Keynes, UK

For more information on this subject, please send for a free booklet to the Correspondence Secretary (address inside front cover).

The background of the entire page is a detailed, high-resolution photograph of an ancient Assyrian relief. It depicts a chaotic battle scene where archers are attacking a fortified city. The archers are shown in various poses, some aiming bows, others in the process of shooting. The city's walls and battlements are visible, with some sections appearing to be under assault or damaged. The relief is carved into a light-colored stone, and the overall tone is warm and historical.

Assyrian archers attack the Jewish city of Lachish –
detail of relief from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh

BRITISH MUSEUM

Letters from Lachish

About forty kilometres to the south west of Jerusalem is the hill of Tell-ed-Duweir. This is the site of the Biblical city of Lachish, which was taken by the Israelites under the leadership of Joshua during the conquest of Canaan. We read that 'the LORD delivered Lachish into the hand of Israel, who took it on the second day, and struck it and all the people who were in it with the edge of the sword...' (Joshua 10:32). King Rehoboam (930-913 BC) the son of Solomon, rebuilt Lachish as one of a chain of cities to defend the kingdom of Judah (see 2 Chronicles 11:5-12).

the Bible stands

THE TEST OF TIME

Later, in the time of King Hezekiah (715-686 BC), Sennacherib king of Assyria came against these fortified cities and captured them including Lachish. There are carved stone reliefs on display in the British Museum, taken from Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh, portraying the siege and the capture of Lachish (see previous page).

The siege is recorded in the Second Book of Kings:

'And in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them. Then Hezekiah king of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, "I have done wrong."' 2 Kings 18.13, 14

The city features later in the Biblical record, in the reign of Zedekiah the last king of Judah (597-587 BC). Jeremiah recorded that:

'...the king of Babylon's army fought against Jerusalem and all the cities of Judah that were left, against Lachish and Azekah; for only these fortified cities remained of the cities of Judah.'

Jeremiah 34.7

The amazing thing is that when the archaeologists were digging at the Tell of Lachish, they found letters written by Hoshayahu, a soldier who was in charge of an outpost not far

from Lachish. The letters, written on clay potsherds (ostrakon), were addressed to Yaush the commanding officer of Lachish and they convey the concerns of this man, that while he was watching for and observing signals from Lachish, he could no longer see any signals from Azekah.

So here is another remarkable piece of evidence preserved for nearly 2,500 years, to be unearthed by the archaeologist in recent times, verifying the truth of Jeremiah's record of the invasion and the impending destruction of the ancient kingdom of Judah. As the prophet Habakkuk wrote in condemnation of those who had plundered the belongings of others, such things would not be concealed forever:

'...the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the timbers will answer it.'

Habakkuk 2.11

Ken Dennis
Kent, UK

One of the Lachish letters, written in ink on a broken shard of pottery (ostrakon).

BRITISH MUSEUM



BIBLE CHARACTERS

Women of faith

It is evident that in Bible times men and women had different roles. This is in sharp contrast to the present age in which the equality of the sexes is presented as an important ideal. God has created men and women with their similarities and their differences, in order to teach us about His plan for the world.

In His wisdom, He created male and female and their relationship to each other, to teach us about the relationship between Christ and his bride: *'For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church...'* (Ephesians 5.23). Similarly, as parents and children, we can learn about our relationship with God who

is our Father in heaven. Viewed in this light, the breakdown of family relationships in society today is an indication of how far men and women have strayed from God's way.

Bearers of the seed

In the beginning, when the world as we know it was created, Eve was miraculously formed from Adam's body as a suitable companion for him. They were therefore of the same substance and nature. When Adam and Eve sinned they came under a curse for disobeying God's command. Adam was to till the ground, to plant seeds and to obtain food to sustain life through toil in *'the sweat of his face'* (Genesis 3.19). From this he learnt that life was a precious gift from God and salvation from death required some considerable effort. Eve was told that

she too would have to struggle and that she and her descendants would bear children through sorrow and pain (Genesis 3.16). Through child-bearing, a 'seed' (descendant) would eventually be born who would provide salvation from death (Genesis 3.15).

The Bible clearly shows us that the 'seed' of the woman that would overcome sin was Jesus Christ as we read in Paul's letter to the Galatians:

'Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He does not say "And to seeds" as of many, but as of one, "And to your seed" who is Christ.'

Galatians 3.16

It is not surprising then that great importance was given to producing sons through which the hope of the fulfilment of God's promised salvation would come. In the Bible, God's promises were sometimes fulfilled miraculously through women like Sarah, Rachel and Hannah who from a human point of view could not bear children. This was to demonstrate that God's plan for the world as revealed in the Bible would prevail and to Him alone is glory due.

Hannah's barrenness

Hannah was barren and as such she considered herself a failure, although the record tells us that *'the*

LORD had closed her womb' (1 Samuel 1.6). This situation was aggravated by the fact that her husband Elkanah had another wife, Peninnah who had children. The family were God-fearing and went annually to the place of worship, the tabernacle at Shiloh, to present their sacrifices. Like all servants of God, Hannah also presented her petition for a son to God in prayer. She vowed to dedicate her first-born son to the Lord, and Eli the High Priest then assured her that God had heard her prayers. So Hannah received her child of promise and called him Samuel, a name that means 'asked of God'. Hannah had promised to bring him up as a Nazirite (1 Samuel 1.11) and to dedicate him completely to the service of God as soon as he was weaned (1 Samuel 1.22).

Under the Law of Moses there were detailed requirements for anyone who was subject to a Nazirite vow (Numbers chapter 6). This wonderful act of self-sacrifice was eventually rewarded. Samuel not only became a Nazirite but was appointed judge over the nation of Israel. He was also a prophet and although not from the tribe of Levi, he took on a priestly role.

A woman of faith

Consider how strong Hannah's faith was. She prayed earnestly for a child. Her faith made her realise that God



Full size replica of the tabernacle in the Timnah National Park in Israel. After Israel had completed their wilderness journey, the tabernacle was given a permanent site at Shiloh. Here Hannah prayed for a son, and the young Samuel helped the high priest Eli. The tabernacle was only superseded when Solomon built his temple in Jerusalem.

was in control whatever happened and it was up to her to accept God's will in the matter. When her long awaited hope was realised she not only dedicated her son to be a Nazirite but she gave him to the High Priest for service in the tabernacle, the focal point of the worship of God. She trusted God completely. As God had given her

the promised son, then God would also protect and guide him in the difficulties of his tabernacle service. This display of faith and trust in God is just like that of Abraham who received the long-awaited child of promise yet was willing to give him back to God as a sacrifice (Genesis 22.1-12).

This attitude of complete trust in God is real faith in God's promises, for it makes God's ultimate purpose more important than the transient things of this life. No doubt Hannah's faith, like that of Abraham before her, will also be accounted to her for righteousness. Although Hannah is not included in the list of the faithful in Hebrews chapter 11,

her famous son Samuel who followed her example of service to God is included:

‘And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson... also of David and Samuel... who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises...’

Hebrews 11.32,33

There are other examples in Old Testament times of women who endured many sorrows in their role of giving birth to the children of God. Consider Jacob's wife Rachel, who was barren for a long time in contrast to her sister Leah. Eventually, like Hannah, she gave birth to a son Joseph who, like Samuel, grew up to be a God-fearing person and demonstrated characteristics that pointed forward to another great child of promise, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In New Testament times there was Elizabeth, who was barren until ‘*well advanced in years*’ (Luke 1.7) before she became the mother of John the Baptist. Then of course there was Mary the mother of Jesus, who was Elizabeth's cousin. They both saw their wonderful children of promise die at a relatively young age in the service of God. They were both sustained in these trials of their faith

by their strong belief in the resurrection.

Children of promise

We are not told much about Hannah and her family after Samuel was born, though we do know she had three more sons and two daughters (1 Samuel 2.21). Mary, the mother of Jesus, also had further children. James, Joses, Simon and Judas are mentioned in the New Testament (Matthew 13.55,56). Both Hannah and Mary recognised that their first-born sons had a special role in God's purpose.

We do not know at what age Samuel was considered weaned and was taken to live at the tabernacle in Shiloh, but we do know that Hannah kept in touch with him and made him a special garment every year (1 Samuel 2.19). This reminds us of the special ‘*tunic of many colours*’ made for Rachel's child of promise, Joseph (Genesis 37.3). That tunic is thought to have been a priestly garment as he was Rachel's eldest child. Of course he was not the first-born of his father Jacob, but he was the first child of the wife Jacob loved most. He was chosen of God and as the first-born son of Rachel, he was given a double portion of his father's inheritance. He eventually became the ruler of all Egypt second only to Pharaoh.

Jesus also had a special garment like Joseph and Samuel. This robe was made in one piece and could possibly have been made by his mother Mary (John 19.23, 24). We can only wonder at the similarities of these three men, each with a special garment and each were children of promise. We can rest assured that Rachel, Hannah and Mary were aware that the only covering acceptable to God is a garment of righteousness, but perhaps the garments were a reminder to their sons of their special privilege and responsibility.

The dress of these Asiatic traders visiting Egypt may give us an idea what Joseph's multi-coloured tunic looked like. The life story of Joseph shows many interesting parallels with the life and work of Jesus.

Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving

In her joy at the birth of her son Hannah offered a prayer of thanksgiving to God (1 Samuel 2.1-10). Many centuries later Mary sang a similar song of thanksgiving which has great parallel significance (Luke 1.46-55).

Looking at the words of these two women of faith we see that they have a similar theme until the last few verses. Hannah finishes with a prophecy about God's purpose including for the first time in the Old Testament the fact that the Messiah (Jesus Christ) would be a king. The nation of Israel did not have a king other than God at that time. Mary's song ended with a declaration that God will keep all His promises to Abraham, no doubt being aware that



Jesus was the fulfilment of Hannah's prophecy.

The two songs include the following similar ideas:

1. Rejoice in the Lord's salvation.
2. Those of humble birth rejoice in His favour.
3. God is mighty and His Name is Holy.
4. The proud are to be scattered.
5. God extends love and forgiveness to those that reverence Him.
6. God puts down rulers and exalts the humble.

The final verses of the two songs are quoted here so the differences can be seen:

'...the pillars of the earth are the LORD'S, and he has set the world upon them. He will guard the feet of his saints, but the wicked shall be silent in darkness. For by strength no man shall prevail. The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken in pieces; from heaven he will thunder against them. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king, and exalt the horn of his anointed.'

1 Samuel 2.8-10

Hannah's song is prophetic and concerns the coming of Messiah. Mary's song follows the same initial

pattern but then closes with the words:

'He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed for ever.'

Luke 1.54,55

Mary invoked the promises to God's people, Israel, spoken to their ancestor Abraham – a promise to bless Israel by a descendant of Abraham, through whose work all nations would eventually be blessed. This descendant was her son, Jesus Christ, the promised saviour and future King of the world.

The record about Hannah and her prayer of thanksgiving forms only a small part of Scripture, but she was one of those women of faith whose lives were pivotal in the purpose of God. The lesson for us is that God requires faith to be exhibited in our lives too, as we read in the letter to the Hebrews:

'But without faith it is impossible to please him, for he who comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him.'

(Hebrews 11.6).

Richard Griffiths
Norfolk, UK



from our mail bag

A reader has asked: ‘Why it is that when Christadelphians meet together the women usually cover their heads with a hat or scarf but the men do not cover their heads? Is it just an affectation (religious tradition), or an outdated habit inherited from the Victorian age in Britain?’

Dress code

I think it’s true to say that all of us tend to wear the clothes that we like, and what we wear differs from time to time. Dress codes vary enormously depending where you live in the world. So, for example, we may ‘dress up’ when we go to a party, or leave off a tie at work if that’s the office dress code, or in very hot weather. Similarly, when Christadelphians meet together, we

wear the clothes we want to wear for that occasion. While we are all ‘creatures of habit’ and tend to copy what others wear, in general terms there is not an unnecessary dress-code at Christadelphian meetings.

We meet together for various reasons, including our Sunday morning services to remember the sacrifice of Christ, running Bible seminars, Sunday schools, Bible studies and public talks. At such occasions what we wear can vary widely.

We meet each week to obey the command given by Jesus himself, to remember him by sharing bread and wine. If you attend such a meeting yourself you will certainly notice that the women cover their heads and the men do not.

So, why is that?

The unseen presence of Jesus

The answer is that at such times Christadelphians take the opportunity to 'say' some things about what they believe by the clothes they wear. To begin with, meeting to remember Jesus and to worship God are very special occasions for us, as we are told in the Gospel of Matthew: *'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them'* (Matthew 18.20).

This tells us that, in a sense, Jesus, although unseen, is present with us at those meetings, so we ought to dress to suit the occasion. But there is another, even better reason for dressing very carefully on such occasions, which is all to do with what we read in the Bible about the crucifixion of Jesus.

The meaning of Christ's sacrifice

To put it simply, the Bible tells us that the punishment for sin (i.e. disobeying God) is death and that Jesus offered himself as a 'sacrifice' (by his death on the cross). This made it possible for that punishment to be taken away from us, as the following passages from the New Testament demonstrate:

'... (Jesus) put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.' Hebrews 9.26

'For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.'

1 Corinthians 15.22

'... (Jesus) bore our sins in his own body on the tree, (i.e. his crucifixion)... by whose stripes ('wounds' NIV) you were healed.' 1 Peter 2.24

In Bible terminology, Jesus has become a 'covering' for our sin – he has 'covered it over' by shedding his blood on the cross. So we can be released from the curse of death that came on everyone 'in the beginning' when Adam and Eve first sinned.

It's hardly surprising that the Bible tells us that Eve was ashamed of what she had done. She knew she had sinned when she disobeyed God, and, for the first time in her life, she felt naked and in need of clothes. At first Adam and Eve thought they could make an acceptable covering for themselves and made their own clothes out of things growing in the garden (Genesis 3.7). However, as far as God was concerned something more effective was needed; Adam and Eve couldn't provide this for themselves. It was God who caused an animal to be killed and its skin made into suitable clothing for Adam and Eve (Genesis 3.21).

So, whatever you choose to believe about the events described in Genesis, you cannot ignore the principle that is illustrated there, that sinfulness can only be covered by the shedding of blood. This introduced the Divine principle of sacrifice as a means of obtaining forgiveness of sins.

A Divine principle

The Bible describes how this important principle became a central part of the Law that God gave to the nation of Israel, as described in the Old Testament. As you can read there, animal sacrifices under that Law had to be repeated time and time again. Whereas, by contrast, the crucifixion of Jesus, God's Son, was the fulfilment of all that the Law pointed forward to. There needed to be a perfect covering for sin, completely removing the need for animal sacrifices (see Hebrews 10.11,12).

This is the teaching of God's Word that every Christadelphian believes and the Bible tells us that we can 'say' things about what we believe by the clothes that we wear, particularly 'head coverings'. We also 'say' things about ourselves by our behavior!

It may seem a bit archaic now, in an age when most women in the western world only really think of

wearing a hat when they are going to a wedding, or when it's bad weather. Similarly, look at a photo of a crowd taken 100 years ago and almost all the men were wearing hats, something you don't see today. So fashions change with time but Divine principles never change!

The importance of a head covering

For Christadelphians, wearing a hat or a headscarf is not about fashion. It is about showing what we believe by what we do or don't wear. Women believers cover their heads at meetings for worship and men do not. Writing to the first century Christians at Corinth, the Apostle Paul explained to them why it is important for women to cover their heads during worship and for men not to do so:

'Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head... A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but

woman from man, neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.’ 1 Corinthians 11.3-5,7-9 NIV

Paul is here reminding his readers at Corinth of the order of events in the beginning as recorded in Genesis. Man was created by God first and the woman was created afterwards as a *‘suitable helper’* for him (Genesis 2.20-25 NIV). The spiritual order reflects the natural order: God – Christ – man – woman. If a woman leaves her head uncovered she is detracting from this spiritual order for her hair is her crowning glory. The Apostle appealed to his readers: *‘Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?’* (1 Corinthians 11.13 NIV). The answer to the question is ‘No’! If a woman does not cover her head she is in effect rejecting the Divinely appointed order of things that puts Christ as the *‘head’* of the man and the man as the *‘head’* of the woman.

A woman’s hat or scarf is also symbolic of our spiritual freedom, the joy and peace which comes from our covering by the blood of Christ. In this respect it’s a great privilege for a woman to demonstrate by her head covering a most important principle. It has nothing to do with women being inferior to men, for both men and women are equal in God’s sight and

equally in need of the covering that Christ’s sacrifice provides!

So what Christadelphians wear at their meetings is not *‘an outdated habit inherited from the Victorian age in Britain’*! There are very good Scriptural reasons why we are careful about what we wear. It’s a simple, but very effective way to remind ourselves and to show others, that some things are supremely important, and that we sincerely believe these things.

It is also a practice that is carried out in recognition of a very important Divine principle as noted above, a principle that has been undermined today by social change affecting the role of women both in and out of the Church. Divine standards do not change and we believe that the words of the Apostle Paul to the First Century believers apply as much today as when they were first written nearly 2,000 years ago. This same teaching is underlined in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians concerning the relationship between husbands and wives:

‘Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour.’ Ephesians 5.22,23 NIV

Correspondence Secretary



WHAT DID JESUS MEAN?

'The kingdom of God is within you'

When Jesus travelled around the towns and countryside of Palestine during his ministry, he said many things that could be puzzling and challenging to his hearers. This was no reflection on the quality of his teaching but was often a consequence of the Jews' lack of understanding of their Scriptures which we know as the Old Testament.

Many of the people could not understand why, if Jesus was destined to take *'the throne of his father David'* (Luke 1.32) and reign as king, there was no apparent evidence of his intention to act like a king.

Others were genuinely perplexed by what they saw and heard, such as when John the Baptist sent his own disciples to ask him, *'Are you the Coming One, or do we look for another?'* (Luke 7.19).

As Jesus came towards the end of his ministry, with just a few weeks left before he was to be rejected by the Jews and crucified, the contrast became more pronounced between those who had set their faces against him and those who could recognise Jesus as the Saviour sent by God. The disciples were by now convinced that Jesus was the Son of God as he claimed to be. Others, like the Pharisees, had become more resistant. Jesus was adept at being able to respond to both types of hearers. The Pharisees had demanded to know when the

kingdom of God should come, and to them he said: *'The kingdom of God does not come with observation'* (Luke 17.20). Jesus then turned his attention to his disciples, providing them with a lot more information about how to prepare for his coming.

This is the background to the verse which we are now studying. It comes within a section of Luke's Gospel narrative from chapters 13 to 19, much of which is not found in the other Gospel records.

The kingdom of God

The Jews would generally have understood that the kingdom of God is to be a literal kingdom on earth, ruled over by a king who was to inherit the revered throne of King David in Jerusalem. This had been the basis of the promise to the Patriarchs, their forefather Abraham and his descendants (see Genesis 12.1-3 and many other similar passages). His natural descendants, the nation of Israel, were constituted the kingdom of God for a time (see Exodus 19.4-6 and 1 Chronicles 29.23), but it was not the complete fulfilment of the promise. The kingdom came to an end but only for a set time, when it was conquered firstly by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians and its people were taken into captivity because of their idolatry and

disregard for God's laws (see Ezekiel 21.25-27). However, the prophets of Israel describe in considerable detail the kingdom of God which was yet to come, when both Jews and Gentiles would sincerely serve God. Here are just two examples:

'Then the moon will be disgraced and the sun ashamed; for the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem and before his elders, gloriously.' Isaiah 24.23

'Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established on the top of the mountains...and peoples shall flow to it...For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And you, O tower of the flock, the stronghold of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, even the former dominion shall come, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem.'

Micah 4.1,2,8

Note the clear statements that Jerusalem will be the focal point of the kingdom of God.

RIGHT: Part of the Old City of Jerusalem, with the Mount of Olives in the background. Though today it is torn by dissension and violence, a restored and peaceful Jerusalem is destined to be at the heart of the kingdom of God

The Pharisees

Jesus spent a lot of time in discussion with the Pharisees, a strict Jewish sect, whom he frequently rebuked for their hypocrisy. The Pharisees had taken compliance with the Law of Moses to ridiculous extremes in their quest for religious purity. Rituals had been introduced which had become irrelevant and impossible to keep, and had nothing to do with the profound teaching of many aspects of the Law. Regarding Jesus as a weak impostor, they demanded of him when the kingdom of God should come, calling into question whether Jesus had any right to claim that he was its king when he had not taken up arms against the Romans.

Jesus answered the challenge in a way that had become familiar, because he exposed the inconsistency and insincerity of the question. As he was later to make clear, the actual time for the kingdom 'to come' is not revealed, either to himself or anyone else (see Matthew 24.36; Acts 1.7). But the very presence of the Son of God, the rightful heir to David's throne, was evidence enough that it would occur. However the Pharisees rejected the evidence. Jesus pointed out that they could continue looking for their idea of a Messiah, but if they refused to acknowledge the validity of his teaching and the miracles he performed, then there



was little more that could be done to convince them. He said to them:

“The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.”

Luke 17. 20, 21

This is a statement that is sometimes misinterpreted to mean that the kingdom of God is a ‘spiritual’ experience in the hearts of the people. This interpretation does not fit the facts. Since the statement was addressed to the Pharisees who had shown themselves to be the enemies of Jesus (Matthew 23.25, 27, 28; John 8.40), why would Jesus tell them that the kingdom of God was ‘within’ them? And what would they have made of such a statement when they, correctly, understood the kingdom to be a literal institution of government and rulership, if it meant no more than a spiritual feeling or state of mind?

If the meaning of this passage were to literally support the idea of a kingdom ‘within you’, then there would also have been no point behind the question about when it ‘would come’ (Luke 17.20).


The phrase ‘within you’ would be better translated as ‘among you’. This is shown as the alternative in the margins of many Bibles. A

modern version translates it as ‘*The kingdom of God is in the midst of you*’ (The ESV Study Bible). Read in this way, we can see that Jesus was pointing out that he himself represented to them what the kingdom was all about. He stood ‘among’ them as the future king. Moreover, the inference behind the original Greek word was that by being ‘within’ or ‘among’ them, the prospect Jesus held out to them was something that they could reach out for. It wasn’t within them already but was within their grasp.

In many places, the Bible shows us that we have to seek for the kingdom in a personal sense (see for example Matthew 6.33), even though it will be a real place in the future. In that way, it is a matter of choice for us. If we reject Jesus, and ignore the teaching of his ministry as the Pharisees did, then we have no prospect of being in the kingdom of God.

The prospect of the kingdom

Although Jesus told the Pharisees that he represented the kingdom to them, using enigmatic language to show they were too blind to see, he then went on to plainly tell his disciples that when the time comes for the kingdom to be established, there will be no room for doubt:



**"For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under
heaven shines to the other part of heaven, so also the
Son of Man will be in his day"**

Luke 17.24

There are other places in Luke where the kingdom is seen in prospect. For example, in Luke 10, we read how Jesus had sent 70 disciples on a mission of their own. They were to travel around, living simply among the people, performing miracles just like Jesus did, as they preached the gospel. He told them to *'heal the sick...and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you"'* (Luke 10.9). No doubt those who were healed would be overjoyed at the result, but the long-promised kingdom did not immediately follow. The miracle simply proved that the power to heal existed. A much greater work of healing will yet take place when the world is cured of its greatest

ailment, which is the curse of sin and death. In summary, this is the mission of Jesus.

In another place shortly afterwards, Jesus was performing another miracle of healing. Whilst some wondered, others were doubtful, saying that Jesus was working *'by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons'* (Luke 11.15). The response of Jesus was logical and powerful, but of particular interest was the reference to the kingdom of God: *'If I cast out demons with the finger of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you'* (Luke 11.20). Yes, the miracle pointed forward to the coming kingdom when all sickness and disease will be cured, and the reason why these afflictions exist will be removed.

The people of the kingdom

In the remainder of Luke chapter 17, Jesus went on to tell his disciples that difficult times lay ahead before the kingdom would be established. The hostility of the Pharisees would intensify until ultimately they secured his death. The hostility would then be turned on them. The

Beelzebub translates as the 'Lord of the Flies'. Some believed him to be the head of the demonic world. He was a survivor of the pagan Baal worship that the Jews had fallen prey to in Old Testament times.



behaviour of Saul the Pharisee as he pursued the Christians and sought their imprisonment and punishment, is described in Acts chapter 9.

Jesus had promised to return after his ascension into heaven and angels reassured the disciples as they watched the departure of their Lord:

'Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw him go into heaven.' Acts 1.11

Words could hardly be clearer!

So far as Saul was concerned, he was converted on the road to Damascus and the change in his life was dramatic. First of all he was deeply humbled, and then he devoted the rest of his life to following Jesus and preaching about the kingdom (Acts 20.25). The superstitious Athenians were told to set aside their worship of many different gods, and '*...seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us*' (Acts 17. 27). In other words, they needed to seek the one true God, their Creator,

who is near to those who approach him in the right way.

But persecution was not the only threat. Jesus had given this warning:

'And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: they ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all' (Luke 17.26, 27).

The majority of people since then have put their own interests before obeying God. This would become a threat to the Christian church as well, while the opportunities and temptations of the world encouraged them to make the most of the present life. Much of Paul's work was devoted to exhorting the believers to remain faithful to their hope in Christ. He wrote to the Christians at Corinth: *'Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?'* (1 Corinthians 6.9).

There would also be people who, like the Pharisees, would demand evidence that the kingdom would come and that Jesus would return, as if more needed to be said. Peter gave this warning:

'...scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation."' 2 Peter 3.3, 4

Peter then warned that this dangerous attitude would result in their destruction, as in the flood of Noah's time (verse 6). By contrast, Peter exhorted his readers to take a different approach. *'Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells'* (verse 13).

Lessons for us

There are a number of things we can learn from Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees. They can be summarised as follows:

- ❖ Jesus is the appointed king of God's coming kingdom and his physical presence was proof that the promise of the kingdom will be fulfilled.
- ❖ The kingdom will bring a time of healing, especially healing from the curse of sin and death.
- ❖ We can either accept or reject the evidence that Jesus provided in his ministry, but we cannot alter it.

- ❖ The kingdom is to be a literal kingdom on earth, not limited to a spiritual state of mind.

If we wish to be in the kingdom ourselves, we have to be prepared for it. We cannot be like the Pharisees, or like the self-seeking majority of mankind. Our minds and our actions have to recognise the need for healing from our state of sin, and discern the wonderful work which Jesus has done to give us the prospect of a place in the kingdom of God.

Alan Wharton
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